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Research council hopes

Following the success of the Irish vote in October, the European Union looks likely to be growing in membership in 2004. At the same time, the EU continues to evolve new kinds of links between members and communal institutions. A potential new addition increasingly supported both by EU officials and many scientists and funding bodies from member states is a European Research Council (ERC). But, you may wonder, does European science need yet another organization?

The Strasbourg-based European Science Foundation (ESF, www.esf.org), home of the European Research Conferences programme, strongly supports the case for the ERC. It has already established a high level expert group chaired by Richard Sykes, rector of Imperial College in London, to elaborate more detailed plans and publish a final report early next year. Meanwhile, the ESF also stays in touch with the grassroot opinions: inviting emails from researchers all over Europe, they have so far compiled 250 pages worth of opinion on the topic, most of it favourable. At the end of November, the ESF will make use of its annual members congregation to discuss and develop the idea further. Should the project take off, the ESF would be an obvious candidate to host the budding council in the startup phase.

Further support comes from the Scandinavian research councils. In fact, Denmark has made the issue a key point of its current EU presidency. At a recent conference in Copenhagen, a majority consensus between the participating scientists and research managers emerged in a number of key questions.

Most supported the idea of setting up an ERC as a funding body (rather than an advisory body) to promote the excellence and visibility of European research. The council should cover science, engineering, humanities and social sciences. Generally, it is seen as a crucial tool to make the European Research Area (ERA) competitive on a global scale. In contrast, it would not primarily address problems specific to some of the poorer countries joining the EU. In other words, it can help Polish researchers to work in Paris, but it would not pay them to stay at home, simply to stop the brain drain.

Now comes the tricky part. Assuming that the council is widely accepted as a worthy cause, where should the money come from? Alternative scenarios mooted so far include variable mixtures of EU, national and private funding. As the EU expansion requires a major rethink of the entire organization and its finances, ERC supporters hope that this time is a window of opportunity where new funding streams can be generated for European science.

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While they call for ‘fresh money’ to generate ‘genuine added value’, the general reorganization should also be seen as a chance to incorporate existing funding structures such as the EU-funded postdoc and framework programmes. Ideally, the ERC should be the funding body for international science in Europe, not one of many competing organizations vaguely associated with the EU.

Alternatively, the main funding agencies of the member states could each throw in a small proportion of their budget. Even though Germany’s Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, www.dfg.de) has not yet made a formal decision on that issue, its president, Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, is quoted as saying that he could imagine each agency contributing 0.5% of their budget originally, which could add up to around 25 million euros per year. Furthermore, the idea of private sponsorship to top up funds available from European and/or national sources has not yet been ruled out.

As critics have pointed out, the trouble will be to keep the political agenda of whoever funds the council out of the running process. If it were to be mainly EU-funded, one could easily imagine the council being held back by endless disputes between member states with different interests. The summary of the Copenhagen meeting states that the council should be ‘accountable to its funders, but autonomous in its operations and run by highly respected scientists.’ This looks very good on paper, but may be easier said than done.

Moreover, the experience from the existing programmes funding post-doc exchange between European countries show that the streams are very unevenly distributed. Obviously, the value of international collaboration and exchange is far from being equally appreciated in all countries. If the future ERC is to truly link European research communities together to reach a critical mass that is globally competitive, this experience needs to be considered carefully. If the ERC ended up funding the brain drain from poorer to richer EU countries, it would be a wasted opportunity.

First steps towards realization of an ERC will include getting political endorsement from the member states, their funding agencies, and their scientists. This process, promoted by the ESF and the Danish EU presidency, is under way already. Then, the tasks of reorganizing existing resources and acquiring new ones should be clearly assigned to an existing body (e.g. the ESF) that could serve as the launch pad for the new council. Now that there is so much change in the EU, scientists will have to make sure that the changes benefit European science.

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